

Genesis 9:1-17
A Sermon

By Rev. Scott Lindsay

This morning we are looking once again at the book of Genesis, picking up at vs 1 of Chapter 9 and working through to verse 17. We have seen, in the space of just a few chapters, a tremendous summary of the very beginnings of human history, starting with the creation of the world. From there we saw the formation of plants and animals and everything else, followed by the formation of human beings and the subsequent commission that was given them – to be fruitful and multiply and to have dominion or “manage” God’s world on His behalf. It was a perfect situation.

Unfortunately, the perfection was short-lived as the man and woman rebelled against God, resulting in their corruption and spiritual death. As a consequence, they, and indeed the whole world, fell under the curse of God such that from that point forward, all their descendants would be born in the state in which the man and woman now found themselves: spiritually dead and alienated from God. On top of all that, they would now live outside the protected environment of the garden and, instead, live in a world that would resist their efforts to subdue and manage it.

Well, it didn’t take long for the proof of their fallen-ness and accursed state to show itself in their own offspring, as the one (Cain) rose up against the other (Abel) and killed him. This violent act blossomed into a pattern of violence that grew along with the multiplication of the human race. Eventually, things reached such a state that “every intention of the human heart was only evil all the time” - as Genesis tells us.

So, in response God determines that he is going to blot the people from the face of the world. And, except for a promise which God made in Genesis 3:15, that would have been the end of all things. However, because of His prior determination to have a people for himself, and to show mercy to those people, and because of the promise that flowed from all that, God determines to spare one family - Noah’s - from the consequences of the flood.

And so, Noah stands as a symbol of God’s mercy against the backdrop of His judgment. He is a “type” or “shadow” of Christ since, just as Noah’s family was spared and carried along in the ark on account of Noah’s relative righteousness, so are those who belong to Christ’s forever family carried along through the judgment of God, on account of the perfect righteousness of Christ.

And so it is that the Bible's opening chapters show the folly and futility of human rebellion against a sovereign God. After that has been conclusively demonstrated, and after the flood has accomplished its purpose(s), God then "prunes back the tree" of humanity to one skinny branch, as one commentator described it - Noah, and his sons.

This new beginning with Noah and his sons is, therefore, a kind of re-creation and re-commissioning that parallels the original creation and original commissioning, in many ways, and differs with it in others. But before we turn to consider these things in greater detail, let's pray and then we'll read the passage together.

Firstly, in looking at the story of Noah as a whole, which takes us back to chapter 6, we see that there are a number of similarities or *parallels* with the original creation account. In the original account there was a time, at the very beginning, when the earth was covered in water until God caused the dry land to appear. In the story of Noah, the world is once again covered with water until God causes the water to recede, at which point the dry land re-appears.

In the original account it is clear that the human beings are the head of the created order, as is obvious in the account of Noah and the animals with him. Further, not only are the humans the head of the created order, they are the only part of his creation which is said to bear God's image. This fact, which is made clear before the flood in Genesis 1, is reaffirmed after the flood in the verses just read to you.

Another parallel is seen in the pattern given in the eating instructions whereby great freedom is accompanied by a clear restriction in both the creation and re-creation accounts. There is also a difference here, which we'll see in a moment, but there is still a similarity in the pattern of liberty and restriction.

Finally, there is a parallel in the commission given to the human beings. As we have already seen, God's instruction to the original human beings, and a significant part of what it means for them to "image" him, was that they were to multiply his images and they were to exercise dominion over his creation. In the Noah account, we see the reaffirmation of these things in God's instructions to him.

One of the clear messages in all of this is to show that, although there has been great evil in the world and God has administered a terrible judgment, none of this has prevented God from carrying out his plans or purposes in the least. All that He intended, from before the beginning of the world, He will bring to fruition in its proper time.

Now, while there are a number of similarities and parallels between the creation account

and the re-creation account in Noah, there are also some important differences. The first difference we note is found in verse 2 of chapter 9. After telling Noah that he is to be fruitful and multiply, God instructs him that the animal kingdom, over which he has been put in charge, is hereafter going to have an inbuilt “fear” or “dread” of human beings. In other words, whereas it would seem that the relationship between humans and beasts, originally, was not a fearful one but was rather one in which the human’s authority was more *congenially* administered; NOW that same authority will be *fearfully* administered - a reign of terror you might say.

Part of the reason for this dread and fear can most likely be traced to the reality of the curse that came upon the creation as a result of the fall into sin. But a more obvious reason for the fear is related to the fact that the human *diet* has now changed. This too is a significant difference between the creation and re-creation accounts.

In the original creation account, in 1:29-30, it very clearly says that God gave both the humans and the animals *plants* for food. In Genesis 9:3, it is clear that in addition to the plants, God is now giving the humans permission to eat animals, under certain conditions. To be sure, not all commentators agree on this point. Some think that there was meat eating going on from the very beginning. But it seems to me that this is not the most natural reading of these verses, especially considering the strong words about not eating flesh with blood in it. Now we’ll say more about this, but for now I simply make the observation that, if meat eating was part of the original diet then it is curious that this prohibition against eating blood - which seems so important to God - is not mentioned at all in the original account.

So, again, one difference between the two accounts is that humans will rule creation by fear and a second difference is seen in the *reason* for that fear: the fact that the animals are now on the menu.

Now, as we have just seen, in issuing permission to eat living creatures, God issues alongside that a strong prohibition not to eat flesh with its lifeblood in it - that is, flesh that has not been prepared by having its blood drained. The reason for this prohibition is most likely due to the crucial role that blood played in the worship of the Old Testament. The shedding of blood was central to the Old Testament sacrificial system and we see it from the first days of humanity’s existence, in the sacrifice offered by Abel.

And so blood as the source and symbol of animate life was significant and, as such, it was not to be regarded lightly or handled callously. The blood of animals was to be “set apart”, as it were, reserved for its one purpose in worship, and not consumed or used for anything else. This would remain the case as long as the Old Testament sacrificial system was in place.

Another possible reason for the prohibition, which is related to the first, may have had to do with the pagan practices that were going on in that day - practices which included rituals where blood was consumed in an unholy and idolatrous fashion. God’s people were to distance themselves from the practices of their pagan neighbors.

The third and perhaps most significant difference between the creation and re-creation accounts is found in verses 5 and 6 of chapter 9, where it says,

And for your lifeblood I will require a reckoning; from every beast I will require it and from man. From his fellow man I will require a reckoning for the life of man. ‘Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image.’

This additional element in the re-commissioning of the human beings reflects the changed circumstances from the original account. Words such as these would not have been necessary in the original creation account. They are now clearly needed in a fallen world. What we have, then, in seminal form are the earliest traces here of the whole idea of the civil magistrate - i.e., the “power of the sword”, as the Reformers put it, that governments have to restrain evil - especially such an ultimate evil as *murder*. The power to respond to these things has been placed in the hands of humankind, in general - “...whoever sheds...blood...by man shall his blood be shed....”

And so, again, these verses have specific implications for the crime of murder - seeing it as an attack on one of God’s image bearers - and also upon the response that is just and appropriate for such a thing. More generally, these verses are related to the role of civil governments in God’s economy, serving as His agents or “ministers” of temporal justice and restraint as well as promoters of good. Both Paul and Peter expand on these things in Romans 13 and 1 Peter 2.

And all of those things are good and important and right and have to do with what can be called the *reactive* implications of these verses. But there are also what we might call more *proactive implications of these verses* as they, once again, affirm the *responsibility* that God gave to his image bearers to exercise authority and manage His creation on his behalf.

“Into your hand they (the creatures) are delivered”, says God. “...As I gave you the green plants, I give you everything...” In saying these things, was God’s only concern *food*? No, there’s more here than just that. God did not give all these things to humanity so that they could simply use and abuse them. He didn’t give us an entire world so that we could just wear it out and then discard it when we are through. He gave us these things to look after them on His behalf and in a way which brings glory to Him as the Creator.

In one of our first studies in Genesis we saw how this commission given to Adam would have been important for God’s people in Moses’ day. They needed to have these words ringing in their ears as they entered into the *Promised Land* knowing that they still had this responsibility to spread God’s images across the face of the earth and to exercise dominion over his creation - especially in this land that was now being given to them.

And if it was important for them to see this with regard to *Adam’s* commission, it was doubly important for them to be reminded of this through *Noah’s commission* since they, like Noah, were fallen people, post-flood people. And yet, in spite of the flood and the judgment and all that had happened, the commission remained. Moses’ people could confidently know that the mandate to be fruitful and have dominion was still theirs.

Likewise for God’s people today. To be sure, we are on the other side of the cross. And Christ has come as perfect humanity, as the perfect image bearer of God and, as such, He is the one who perfectly fulfills this two-fold commission in Genesis. Through his life and death He has saved and is saving His people. And as we bring the good news of Jesus Christ to others, we partner with him in the outworking of that venture so that every time someone responds to the Gospel, God’s image is fruitfully multiplied.

Likewise, Christ also fulfills the commission to exercise dominion and manage God’s creation. He did it, for starters, by conquering sin and death and, in that, doing what was needed to reconcile all things to God, and to undo the effects of the curse upon creation. And Christ continues to carry forward this commission indirectly through his disciples and followers, through whom his dominion is being advanced on two fronts: inwardly in human hearts through the grace of sanctification and then outwardly through *transformed and being transformed lives* as they exercise the stewardship of this world that they are to manage for God’s glory.

And yet this aspect of the commission, as one writer (Dr. Richard Pratt) has

observed, has not always been well understood or appreciated by God's people. He writes,

Many believers see the Christian faith as a way to escape from the world, rather than as a commission to be involved in it...This view has dominated evangelical perspectives in the United States since World War II, leading [many] committed Christian to withdraw from public life. The sciences and arts, mass media, education, and politics have been largely left in the hands of unbelievers....[but in contrast to this] Jesus says, "You are the salt of the earth...You are the light of the world... (Matt 5:13,14)" When salt and light do not resist its influence, decay and darkness run rampant in the world. If you and I do not accept the responsibility given to Noah and his sons, we leave the world to suffer more and more under the cruel mastery of sin.

Where has [this] religious escapism taken us in modern Western culture? What

has been the result of our failure to serve as salt and light? Take a look at the great centers of population in the West. Europe and the United States have degenerated into Christian graveyards. The stench is overwhelming. Crime, immorality, sexual diseases, and drug abuse run rampant. Christian values are but faint memories of centuries long forgotten. This is what happens when Christians try to escape, rather than fulfill their responsibilities in the world...."

Dr. Pratt then goes even further and says,

Sometimes I become angry with the direction the world is taking... But I have to admit that my anger is often misplaced. What should we expect when we leave unbelievers in charge? Instead of being angry at the world, we should be upset with ourselves for letting things get this bad....Where are the Christian politicians? Where are the Christian playwrights? Where are the believers moving into leadership roles in our colleges and universities? Which followers of Christ will take the high ground in medicine, law and business?....Christians should seek to advance in government, rather than complaining about political corruption. We should be first in charitable organizations, rather than [simply] bemoaning the plight of the poor. We should be at the forefront of ecological projects, rather than laughing at those who celebrate Earth Day. We should be leaders in every good cause. As physical and spiritual descendants of Noah, we have not been called to escape from the world, but to influence it...

And so, with a few differences, and with a number of similarities, we see a very clear recreation and re-commissioning thing going on in the account of Noah,

with enormous and far-reaching implications for God's people today.

Along with the theme of re-creation and re-commissioning that is found in these verses, we also see that, as part of all that, God takes steps to *reassure* Noah and his family of his faithfulness and of his gracious intentions toward them. God wants Noah to know and remember that all this recreating and re-commissioning is not for naught.

He does this in two ways. Firstly, by announcing that he has established a covenant with Noah and all creation, and then by furnishing them with a visible sign of these things. Let's think about both of these things in turn, starting with the announcement of a *covenant* (read again 9:8-11)

Now a covenant, in biblical language, is just an agreement which God determines to make between himself and another party or parties with whom He has decided to be in relationship. And not only does God determine that there will be this relationship, but he determines what the nature of the relationship will be - as is his perfect right as the Creator.

And so God announces here that he is establishing a covenant relationship between himself and Noah, and with all his family and their offspring *and* in fact with *every living creature on the planet* - which you may or may not have picked up on.

But this is actually a covenant between God and the entire creation. This is the same covenant which God said he *would* make in Genesis 6:18, and which he resolved *privately, to himself*, in Genesis 8:21-22, and which he is now explicitly and *publicly* making with his creation. And what is the substance of the covenant? It is fairly simple, as we have already seen.

God says that he will never again destroy the world again by the waters of a flood. Further, as Genesis 8:22 makes clear, the promise not to destroy is, at the same time, also a *promise to preserve* the creation, and to maintain a stable, predictable world.

And then, as a kind of seal and guarantee of his commitment to these things, God provides a *sign* - not in the sense that this is the first time that a rainbow has appeared in the sky - but in the sense that he is taking an existing thing and investing it with a new significance. Now, there are two things I want us to think about with regard to this sign - firstly, its *function* and finally, its *meaning* or

significance.

With regard to the function of the sign, I simply want to draw your attention to the fact

that its usefulness is in *two directions*. In other words, it is a sign that not only reminds Noah and the creation of God's promises, but also *reminds God of His own promises* - notice verses 14-16 (read this). Now you might ask, "Why would God need to be "reminded" of his own promises? Does God forget things?"

Of course, God does not forget his promises. And mental recall is not really the idea that the Hebrew language is trying to convey when it speaks of God "remembering" things. The idea of remembering, when applied to God, has more to do with God's accommodating himself to his creation by sovereignly determining to link his gracious and active response to realities within our world. Whenever God does this, he does so because he has chosen to, not because he must.

God's decision to act in this way is similar to the way that our prayers function within the

providence of God. To be sure, God could have so arranged his universe and so set his plans such that they did not involve humanity in any way shape or fashion. And yet, in his mercy he has condescended to work otherwise such that our prayers actually *do matter* since they, as the *means by which he does things in the world*, are as much a part of his sovereign purposes as the *ends* themselves.

In a similar fashion, God's determining that he will respond graciously toward his people

upon apprehending the "sign" of the rainbow - and so "remember" them - that determination is simply a function of his mercy toward us and his willingness to accommodate himself to his finite creation. And so, when God's people see the sign of the rainbow *at that very moment* God is "seeing" the same sign, remembering its significance and sovereignly choosing in that moment to continue to honor his promise of patient forbearance toward his creation. And so the sign of the rainbow functions, as every other biblical sign functions, as a *real means of God's grace* toward his people. Now, I don't know about you, but that just comforts my socks off. I can't wait for it to rain again.

The second and final thing I want you to see this morning is not only the *function* of the

sign that we call a "rainbow," but the *meaning or significance* of this sign. Now over the years, various commentators have come up with explanations of why *this* sign was used on *this occasion*, as opposed to some other sign. Some have tried to tie the symbolism of the rainbow to its bright array of colors and, in some sort of psychological way have related this to the concept of *hope*. Some have said that the rainbow "band" is part of a circle which symbolizes a wedding band -

and so signifies God's covenant faithfulness with his bride - the church. Some have said that there is no real symbolism to be found other than that which was arbitrarily assigned to it on this occasion.

However, there is another perspective on the rainbow which I think is exegetically much more likely and seems to fit very well with the context of the Noah account, as well as with the wider context of the Bible. In order to see this, let me make a couple of quick observations.

Firstly, the word which is translated here, in English, as "rainbow" is actually, in Hebrew, simply the word "bow" and is the same word which is used to refer to the weapon which we call a bow – as in "bow and arrow". So file that away for a moment.

The other observation to make is that the Old Testament, in several places, represents God as a kind of Divine Warrior and uses the language of warfare to refer to Him. For example, Psalm 7:12-13 reads,

If a man does not repent, God will whet his sword; **he has bent and readied his bow**; he has prepared for him his deadly weapons, making his arrows fiery shafts...

Or Psalm 18:13-14,

The Lord also thundered in the heavens, and the Most High uttered his voice, hailstones and coals of fire. **And he sent out his arrows and scattered them**; he flashed forth lightnings and routed them....

Similar language can be found in Lamentations and in the Minor Prophets, all of which describes God in the same fashion - *exercising his righteous judgment by bending his bow and sending arrows of wrath upon a sinful people.*

Now, keeping these things in mind, consider what Noah and his people have just been through - a world-wrecking flood which was this awesome demonstration of the wrath of God. The imagery of Psalm 18 which we just read - linking the arrows of God's judgment with natural phenomenon such as hailstones and lightning - that imagery seems to be particularly relevant for what went on in the flood.

And so, at the end of this judgment, God promises that he is never again going to destroy the world in this way. And so, what does he give as a sign of that promise? He takes his *bow*, his weapon of judgment, and *lays his weapon down*, so to speak. This is the symbolism of what we call a "rainbow," which the Hebrew

simply says is a *bow* or “God’s bow.” It is a weapon of war, and wrath and judgment, now become a symbol of peace, no longer pointing toward the earth but, instead, pointing heavenward, away from the earth.

Again, it seems that this is the intended significance of this “bow” which God has set in the sky as a sign of his promises to his creation. And if I could take that a step further, I would say that an even deeper aspect of this may be seen when we consider what happened in the cross of Jesus Christ and the judgment which he endured on behalf of his people - and which was foreshadowed by the judgment in Noah’s day.

Christ, as the substitute for his people, took on all their sin and, therefore, made himself liable for God’s righteous judgment against that sin. And so God pours out his wrath against sin upon his own son - which was the only way that a holy God could reconcile a sinful people to himself.

And, in light of all that, I hope it is not stretching things too much to consider this and then see a further symbolic significance of God’s bow. If indeed this is God’s weapon of war, turned away from earth and pointing heavenward - then it is not insignificant to note that in sending his Son to die on the Cross, God was, indeed, turning his wrath upon himself - in the person of His own Son - taking an arrow into his own heart, as it were, to accomplish the salvation of His people.

And so it is that just as the bow was a weapon of war that became a symbol of God’s covenant promises, so too is the cross of Christ - also an instrument of pain and death – now become a symbol of God’s covenant faithfulness and a picture of the reconciliation that he has brought about in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Look, then, to the Cross of Christ, and see God’s judgment against sin, see His mercy toward sinners, and see the promise of God fulfilled in the Lord Jesus Christ.